

Youth and Motor Vehicle Safety: An Important Public Health Issue

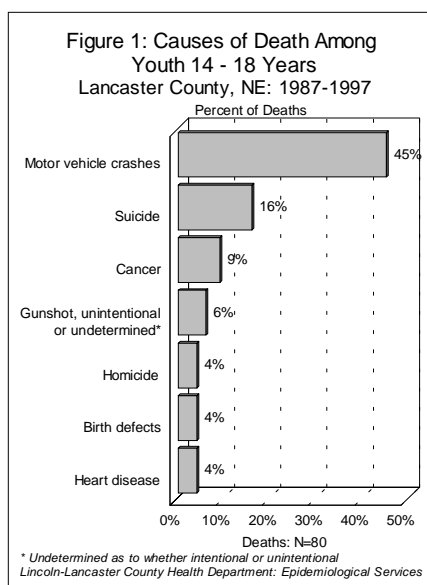
Motor vehicle injuries are a serious public health issue for the youth population of Lancaster County. This issue of Epi-Info describes key issues related to youth motor vehicle safety, including key health outcomes, behaviors, and community initiatives. Information is provided on fatalities and injuries, seatbelt use, alcohol use and driving, and community programs.

Fatalities and Injuries

In Lancaster County, motor vehicle crashes (MVC) are the leading cause of death among 14 - 18 year-olds, representing 45% of all deaths to that age group (**Figure 1**).

The National Center for Health Statistics reports that nationally MVC are the leading cause of death among teens. Compared with the fatality rate for drivers 25-65 years old, the rate for teenage drivers is about four times as high.

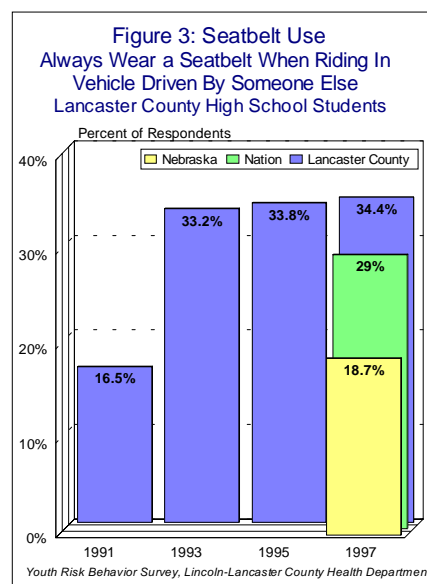
MVC are also the leading cause of injuries to teens treated in emergency rooms (**Figure 2**) in Lancaster County.



Seatbelt Use

Teen seatbelt usage is increasing but still could use a great deal of improvement in Lancaster County. According to the 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 34.4% of teens in Lancaster County reported always wearing a seatbelt when riding in a vehicle driven by someone else (**Figure 3**).

Lancaster County reported a higher rate than both Nebraska (18.7%) and the Nation (29.0%).



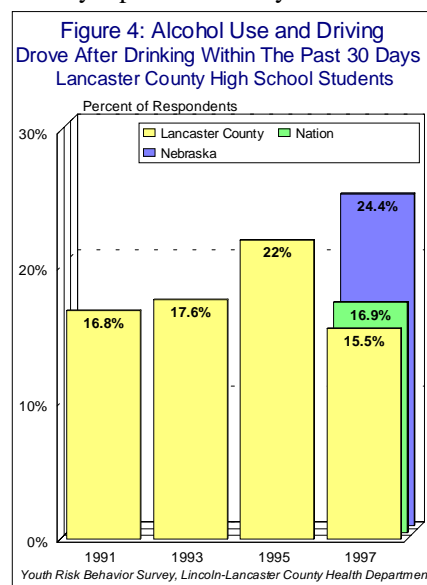
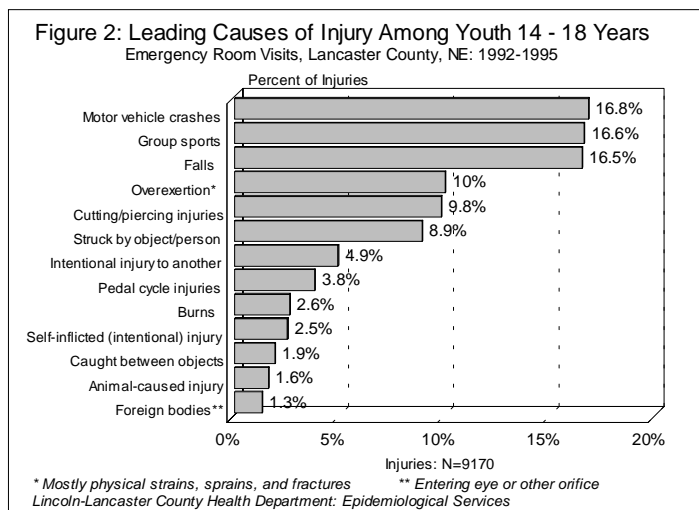
Responses to the YRBS also indicated that females were more likely to always wear a seatbelt when riding in a car driven by someone else than were males in Lancaster County (35.7% and 32.8%, respectively) and Nebraska (20.8% and 16.7%, respectively).

Alcohol Use and Driving

In the 1997 YRBS, 15.5% of high school students in Lancaster County reported that they had driven a vehicle one or more times after drinking alcohol during the 30 days preceding the survey (**Figure 4**).

This rate was lower than that for teens in Nebraska (24.4%) and the Nation (16.9%).

Males were more likely to report drinking and driving than were females in Lancaster County (20.5% vs. 11.1%), Nebraska (27.2% vs. 21.5%), and Nationally (21.0% vs. 12.0%).



Community Programs

The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department (LLCHD) has been addressing youth traffic safety issues with community programs throughout Lancaster County since 1981. In 1993, the “Teens on the Road, Safety Behind the Wheel” campaign was developed, targeting employers of teenage drivers. In 1996, an award winning program called “Safe Travel on Gravel” was implemented.

A significant step in addressing general youth driver safety was implemented by the State of Nebraska in January 1999 with a graduated licensing system. In order for a 16-year-old to obtain a provisional operator’s permit (POP) new requirements include either completion of a driver’s education course certified by the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) or submittal of an affidavit and notarized driving log signed by an adult driver confirming the completion of 50 hours of supervised driving time. Loss of points on the POP can result in a delay of obtaining a driver’s license.

The LLCHD has coordinated a Youth Driver Training Program for 1998-1999 that is aimed at a joint audience of young drivers and their parents. This does not fulfill the requirements of a certified DMV approved course nor should it be considered a “traditional” driver’s education class. The emphasis is on parents working with their teenage drivers to increase teens’ behind-the-wheel experience. Parents and teens are encouraged to inform themselves of major youth driving risks, assess their own driving situations and reinforce safe driving behaviors. Priority issues, including impaired driving, seatbelt use and speed, are discussed, along with financial and personal consequences of bad driving behavior.



Conclusion

A query of public health data for Lancaster County reveals the impact of motor vehicle safety on the health of youth in our community. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and injury to young people. Preventing these motor vehicle crashes would prevent nearly half of all deaths to teens and about 400 emergency room and hospital visits per year. Behavioral data shows that while seatbelt use among youth is increasing, there remains a large majority of the youth population which reports not wearing a seatbelt when riding in a vehicle driven by someone else. Driving after drinking remains a common and dangerous practice among youth in Lancaster County, but tends to occur more frequently in the teenage male population than among females.

The LLCHD and other community partners have accomplished a great deal in raising awareness of high risk youth driving behaviors, but challenges remain. It is hoped that increasing parental involvement in the active supervision of their teens’ driving will encourage a safer future for our youth.

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